

246 KEEMLE, CHARLES

Printer

Norfolk

Journeyman printer in a job-printing partnership with Samuel Dillworth (138), originally in Norfolk (1816), then in Vincennes, Indiana (1817), later publisher in St. Louis (1825-49).

Keemle has become a mythic figure in recent years in the history of the American West as one of the many "mountain men" who braved the wilderness to trade for furs with the native peoples of the central Rocky Mountains. Yet that legendary employment was but a brief interruption in a career in journalism that began in Virginia and stretched into Indiana and Missouri over six decades. Born the son of a Philadelphia ship captain in 1797, Keemle was left to the care of a maternal uncle in Norfolk when his mother died there in 1806. That uncle bound the boy out as an apprentice to the printing trade in the office of the *Norfolk Herald* under James O'Connor (317) and his shop foreman Daniel Baxter (027). The War of 1812 interrupted that training when Keemle joined the 1st Company of the 8th Virginia Militia Regiment under Norfolk's distinguished Capt. John West in defense of the port in 1814. It seems that his deployment then put him in contact with one Samuel Dillworth, a journeyman printer from Petersburg who had been dispatched with the 39th Virginia Militia Regiment – the Petersburg Volunteers – to help defend Norfolk during the invasion of the Chesapeake in the summer of 1814; the two printers evidently decided at that time to work together there after the war.

In mid-1816, when Keemle was nineteen, he and Dillworth set up a job-printing office in Norfolk independent of both men's former masters. It was a move that likely was triggered, in part, by the prospect of Thomas G. Broughton (055), another young journeyman in the *Norfolk Herald* office, becoming the partner and heir-apparent to a chronically ill and aging O'Connor; so if Keemle was to move up in the printing trade, he would now have to leave O'Connor's employ. The job-printing firm seems to have been a contingency plan for both tradesmen, a temporary refuge while they regrouped – and an interesting opportunity was presented in short order by one of their customers, Samuel K. Jennings (236). Jennings had just relocated to Norfolk from Lynchburg, where he had edited the *Lynchburg Press*; now, he turned to expanding his medical practice via the manufacture of a patented therapeutic bath in the port town, contracting Keemle & Dillworth to print an instruction manual for its use. In their conversations, Jennings told the young tradesmen of the dearth of printers and papers in Indiana where his brother, Jonathan Jennings (1784-1834), had just been elected as that state's first governor. Over the ensuing winter, the partners moved their job-press to the frontier town of Vincennes, Indiana, on the Wabash River. Purportedly, an impoverished Keemle covered the distance from Baltimore to Pittsburgh on foot in March 1817.

Once settled in Vincennes, Keemle & Dillworth began printing a new weekly there, the *Indiana Centinel*, in opposition to the long-lived *Western Sun* of Elisha Stout. In the ensuing five years, the two papers contended for dominance in that neighborhood, with the *Centinel* supporting Gov. Jennings and the *Sun* his opponents – a marked irony given Jennings's one-time ownership of that journal (1806-09). But in doing so, Dillworth and Keemle soon faded into the backdrop behind the unmistakable editorial presence of Dr.

Elias McNamee; formerly a contributor to the *Sun*, he had probably financed their move to Indiana, and was now building a newspaper network in support of the new administration of his old friend Jennings. Still, Dilworth was apparently fully committed to the Vincennes situation, as can be seen subsequently in his long and profitable residence there; but Keemle quickly soured on his subordinate role in the small frontier village, leaving the office after just four months, and moving west to St. Louis that August.

In St. Louis, Keemle quickly found trade work in the *Western Emigrant* office of Sergeant Hall, and remained there through the August 1818 ownership change that brought soon-to-be-famous Thomas Hart Benton into the editorial chair under its new owners Isaac Henry and Evarist Maury. Keemle was evidently still in their employ in 1820 when he turned to the fur trade. That August he was hired by the American Fur company as a clerk and spent the following winter trading on the Kansas prairie; his performance then brought his selection as the clerk for the Missouri Fur Company's first expedition into the Yellowstone River country and so he lived and traded in the Rockies for the next three years. In spring 1823, Keemle barely escaped death when his party was attacked by Blackfoot warriors near the headwaters of the Missouri River; still he remained in the west another two seasons in the employ of the company, returning to St. Louis in the fall of 1824. With substantial savings in his pocket, Keemle now returned to journalism, never to trade in pelts again.

In January 1825, Keemle bought into the first of a series of journals that he would publish in St. Louis over the next thirty years. This first effort was the *Missouri Advocate and St. Louis Enquirer*, conducted with Stephen W. Foreman; the pair had bought the residue of Benton's old *Emigrant*, now called the *St. Louis Enquirer*, from Duff Green, who was leaving the city to take up the reins of a new pro-Jackson paper in Washington; Keemle's newspaper was openly supportive of the now-U.S.-senator Benton and his allies in the state; however, the partnership dissolved when Foreman became embroiled in the attempted impeachment of a federal district court judge there who had upheld land titles granted by the old Spanish and French colonial administrations in April 1826. So his second paper resulted from their abrupt parting in late 1826, *The Missouri Herald and St. Louis Public Advertiser*. Keemle soon found himself opposing the presidential candidacy of Andrew Jackson, exhibiting decidedly Whiggish tendencies in his paper; so following Jackson's inauguration in 1829, he recast his *Missouri Herald* as the *St. Louis Beacon* and ramped up its rhetoric. This led to a libel suit being brought against him in 1830 by Foreman, who was now an uncompromising Jackson supporter; the popular and considerable judgment against Keemle (\$5000) in April 1831 apparently undermined both his finances and health; so in December 1832, he announced the closing of the *Beacon* and his retirement from journalism because of illness. Keemle had the last laugh though; some twenty months later, in August 1834, he bought the paper that Foreman had then edited – the *St. Louis Times* – and its office apparatus in a marshal's sale, and then closed the paper at year's end, using the press to conduct a new job-printing office. The following May, Keemle turned back to his *Norfolk Herald* roots, by proposing a non-partisan mercantile advertiser, the *Commercial Bulletin and Missouri Literary Register*, which launched in June 1835. After six months, he sold his interest to his partners in order to concentrate on his Franklin Book and Job Printing Office alone, while those partners turned the *Bulletin* into a Know Nothing paper, and so killed it. But another literary journal

would soon follow; the *Missouri Saturday News* appeared in early 1838 in conjunction with Major Alphonso Wetmore, another veteran of the War of 1812 who had labored in St. Louis's press offices since 1820; but once again, its literary perspective was a hard sell among politically motivated readers, bring it to an end in January 1839. Keemle now chose to remain outside of the journalistic fray while conducting his job press. Yet his literary instincts were not far from the surface; hence in May 1844, he joined with Matthew C. and Joseph M. Field, Irish émigré brothers with theatrical aspirations, to publish the *Saint Louis Reveille*, another literary journal; their arrangement was profitable and so lasted until 1849, despite Matthew's death in late 1844. But in 1849, Keemle decided to retire from journalism once again, this time for good, and sold the *Reveille* to the owners of a local Democratic paper, who merged the two journals.

While the sale marked the end of Keemle's journalism career, his job-press continued until at least 1857, when it issued a Presbyterian tract celebrating the anniversary of the St. Louis Bible Society. Still, he was not inactive. As his later literary papers indicate, he had a life-long interest in the theater and was a founding director of the St. Louis Theater Company in 1837. He was frequently a part of the city's commemorative committees, evincing particular interest in the anniversaries of the city's founding and Benjamin Franklin's birth. Over the years, he refused several proffered appointments to serve as an agent for western tribes he had encountered in his trading days, always citing his fragile health, but he remained open to elective office. After a few failed campaigns for local offices in the 1840s, he was elected as Recorder of Deeds for St. Louis County in 1853, serving until the outbreak of war in 1861. Keemle then retired from public life, and the trials of the war, having passed the age of sixty. He died among his family at his St. Louis home in September 1865.

Personal Data

Born: Oct. 8 1797 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married: Oct. 7 1833 Mary Oliver @ St. Louis, Missouri.
Died: Sept. 28 1865 St. Louis, Missouri.
Children: Three children; two daughters named Mary and Jessie.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *War of 1812 Service Records*; Scharf, *History of St. Louis*; Kaser, *St. Louis Book and Printing Trade*; *Edwards's Great West* (1860); Van Ravensway, *St. Louis*; notices in *Missouri Intelligencer* (@ Fayette 1823-30, @ Columbia 1830-65); *St. Louis Commercial Bulletin* (1835); *New Orleans Daily Picayune* (1845-49); obituary in *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1865.

Standard sources that rely on nineteenth-century histories all report varying dates for the publication of Keemle's journals, as well as that of his birth. Dates used here for imprints are from bibliographic records; date of his birth taken from the headstone on his grave (see photo at FindaGrave.com).